

We've Come a Long Way: A Servicewide View

Long-time National Park Service curators will remember when we typed catalog records using carbon ribbons, loaded storage cabinets with paradichlorobenzene, and exhibited human remains and sensitive objects without consultation. That time was before the Automated National Catalog System (ANCS), the application of Integrated Pest Management to museum collections, and management policies that called for consultation with affected communities before deciding about the treatment of traditionally-

associated resources. That time was only about 15 years ago. We've come a long way since then.

In 1980, we thought we had an estimated 10 million objects, approximately 3 million of which were cataloged. We now estimate the number is over 28 million objects and 11,800 linear feet (l.f.) of archives.* We have cataloged 45% of those objects and archives since 1988. Beginning in 1983 we have annually tracked the growth and documentation of NPS collections as parks complete the Collections Management Report.

The Object's the Thing

Recently while reviewing a packet of information I acquired 25 or so years ago I found the following information which was written and presented at an exhibits seminar by a very dear friend, the late Carol A. Cline Harlow, who at that time was Exhibit Designer for the Panhandle Plains Museum in Canyon, Texas. I believe the information is as timely and pertinent today as it was lo, those many years ago.

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Intellectual honesty and objectivity are a must for the curator and designer in the interpretation of information and artifact in the museum. Personal prejudices and subjective views of history and art are to be avoided in any presentation.

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The integrity of an object is important in its presentation. No object may be altered beyond normal restoration methods. If it was never shiny, don't shine it, even if it looks better shined. The personal history, use and intent of the producer of that object are the things that give it value; to add or subtract from that object to gratify personal aesthetics is to breach the integrity of the object.

Creative history is out; creative interpretation of history is in. Careful research about arti-

fact and events is the base, and often the inspiration, for a good design. Truth is not only stranger than fiction, it is more interesting.

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The artifact should be comfortable in its surroundings and its position while on display. A general rule to follow for museum exhibits is to display the object as it was used, i.e., a rifle shown in a horizontal position shoulder high, or in a stacked position, barrel up; clothing on a dimensional form.

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The purpose of building or mounting an exhibition is to show the artifact. The display method used should enhance the artifact, not diminish it. When colors, case, furniture, graphics and other display accessories become so dramatic they overpower the object, good interpretation is the loser to ego.

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A major find from China
So inspired the museum designer
With graphics immense
And colors intense
Asia's major became Asia's minor
—C.A.C.

Submitted by H. Dale Durham, NPS Gulf Coast Cluster System Support Office, Atlanta.

We know that some park and center collection storage facilities are exemplary. At others we have seen that the security and environment for toilet paper was better than for collections. Though we could identify the problems case-by-case, not until 1986, when each park completed the "Inspection Checklist for Museum Storage and Exhibit Spaces" did we have a uniform assessment servicerwide.

At an opportune time, Congress asked NPS to submit, with its fiscal year 1988 budget, a report on the management status of its museum collections. That report included a staffing and funding estimate to catalog the backlog and correct the preservation and protection deficiencies that we had recently identified. This year we will have applied over \$36 million of earmarked funds toward bringing the collections up to standard.

In 1984 we revised and reissued the *NPS Museum Handbook* in a loose leaf format so that it could be readily updated. We issued updates in 1987, 1990, 1994, and 1995. We revised and updated the *Conserve O Gram* series and sold both publications to the general public through the Government Printing Office. In this and other ways we raised the profile of the NPS museum program among our counterparts in other government agencies and the private sector.

Though we have come a long way, we estimate that at our present levels of funding it will be 2011 before we have everything cataloged. We also realize that caring for museum collections is a process, not a product. Preserving collections requires constant vigilance and cyclic maintenance. To achieve security for collections, we must continue to educate new staff to key control policies and opening and closing procedures. We must maintain and update security systems. Likewise, we must continue to revise our policies and proce-

dures to reflect new technology and research. This year we are in the process of migrating from ANCS to a new automated collections management system that will better meet user needs and reflect current technology.

Access to museum collections and their accompanying documentation, whether it be through exhibits, research, personal interpretive services, or electronic technology, is our ultimate objective. In 1995 we established a site on the World Wide Web, giving a scope of collection summary and contact information for every park with a collection. We included a "Treasures of the Nation" section with images of objects and provided information on and samples of NPS museum collections management publications. Several parks developed World Wide Web sites with more detailed information on park resources.

We are planning publications about the collections in book, digital, CD-ROM, video, and other formats that will reach wider and wider audiences by the turn of the century. Our efforts to upgrade our automated documentation systems and improve the preservation and protection of collections will encourage information access and ensure that the collections will be in good condition for such uses.

We have come a long way. And the farther we go, the more opportunities appear. Each milestone, each advancement opens new ways to look at, analyze, interpret, access, preserve, use, and enjoy these treasures of the nation.

Ann Hitchcock has been Chief Curator of the National Park Service since 1980.

**According to the 1993 Collections Management Report.*

Pitcher, plates, shower head, fire extinguisher, Ellis Island. Photos by Klaus Schnitzer.

